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ABSTRACT

Black and white middle SES preschool boys and girls were compared on the frequency with which they interacted socially with peers (people orientation) and on the frequency with which they engaged in nonsocial activity which involved being occupied with some material or task (object orientation). They also were compared on the frequency with which they engaged in the cognitive play types: functional, constructive, and dramatic. No race differences were found for people and object orientation. Sex, but not race, differences were found for level of social interaction. Boys engaged more frequently than girls in the highest level of social interaction. On frequency of the cognitive play types, neither race differences, sex differences, nor a race by sex interaction occurred. These findings raise questions about other assumed differences between black and white children. This study underscores the necessity to treat black children as a homogeneous group but to recognize that sex, socioeconomic status, and possibly other characteristics influence their social and cognitive behaviors. (Author)

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Social Orientation and Cognitive Play in Black and White Middle SES Preschool Boys and Girls

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Abstract

Black and white middle SES preschool boys and girls were compared on the frequency with which they interacted socially with peers (people orientation) and on the frequency with which they engaged in nonsocial activity which involved being occupied with some material or task (object orientation). They also were compared on the frequency with which they engaged in the cognitive play types: functional, constructive, and dramatic. No race differences were found for people and object orientation. Sex, but not race, differences were found for level of social interaction. Boys engaged more frequently than in the highest level of social interaction. On frequency of the cognitive play types, neither race differences, sex differences, nor a race by sex interaction occurred. These findings raise questions about other assumed differences between black and white children. This study underscores the necessity to treat black children as a homogeneous group but to recognize that sex, socioeconomic status, and possibly other characteristics influence their social and cognitive behaviors.

Social Orientation and Cognitive Play in Black and White Middle SES Boys and Girls

Children's social orientation has been considered to be composed of two dimensions, object orientation and people orientation. Object-oriented children tend to focus their attention on tasks and spend more time in nonsocial activities than in social situations; people-oriented children are attracted to peers and prefer social situations to nonsocial activities (Jennings, 1977). Young (1970) suggested that black children are people oriented. She observed that they prefer social interchanges over impersonal objects and that they are more responsive to social than to nonsocial stimuli. She concluded that this people orientation develops because black families restrict object manipulation and exploration but encourage interpersonal activity. Although black and white children have not been compared directly on social orientation, both Hale (1982) and Shade (1982) interpret various descriptions of black children's behaviors to mean that black children are people oriented and white children are object oriented. Hale (1982) attributes black children's academic difficulties to their people orientation, or more precisely to their lack of object orientation, and white children's academic success to their object orientation. Object-oriented children, in contrast to people-oriented children, are thought to have interests and propensities that are compatible with the setting, expectations, and requirements of the school (Hale, 1982; Shade, 1982).

With few exceptions, the studies upon which generalizations about black children's characteristics are based have used subjects from the lower

socioeconomic strata. Although Young (1970) did include observations on a small number of middle SES families, the vast majority of her subjects were lower SES. Middle SES black families are not likely to restrict the manipulation and exploration of objects as lower SES black families were observed to do. Suggesting that black children do not form a homogeneous group in cognitive and social behaviors is Griffing's (1980) comparison of the sociodramatic play of black "low" SES and "high" SES boys and girls. She found significant effects of SES, gender, and the SES by gender interaction on sociodramatic play types. McLoyd (1985), who also studied black children's pretend play, used only lower SES subjects and observed only pretend play. Even with this restricted SES group, she found that black children varied in pretend play style according to the combination of their gender and the level of structure of the materials with which they played. That is, a gender by structure interaction determined their type of play.

Since black children do not appear to be homogeneous in sociodramatic or pretend play, it seems unlikely that they would compose a homogeneous group which differed from an economically comparable group of white children in other cognitive and social behaviors. The cognitive play types labeled and studied by Smilansky (1968) and based on the stages of cognitive play occurring at the preschool level that both Buhler (1947) and Piaget (1962) described appear to be related to social orientation as well as to cognitive development (Pinkett & Quay, 1985; Rubin, Watson, & Jambor, 1978; Shure, 1963). These cognitive play types are functional (motoric, purposeless, repetitive), constructive (creative, goal-directed, productive), and dramatic (imaginative). If the

statements that black children are more people oriented than white children are valid, then black children would be expected to differ from white children in the cognitive play types in which they typically engage, as well as in social orientation. Since children who play alone tend to engage in constructive play and those who are socially active tend to engage in dramatic play (Pinkett & Quay, 1985), black children would be expected to engage more frequently in dramatic play, while white children would be expected to engage more frequently in constructive play.

The influence of race on social (people versus object) orientation or on cognitive play type has not been empirically studied. Within a single ethnic group the influence of gender on social orientation and cognitive play is unclear. For social orientation, various inconsistent findings have been reported to the effect that boys are more people oriented than girls (Johnson & Ershler, 1981), that girls exhibit these behaviors more frequently than boys (Brindley, Clarke, Hutt, Robinson, & Wethli, 1973); and that there is no gender difference (Jennings, 1977). For functional, constructive, and dramatic play, some investigators have found no gender differences (Rubin & Maioni, 1975; Smilansky, 1968), while others have reported that boys engage in more functional and dramatic play and girls engage in more constructive play (Johnson & Ershler, 1981; Rubin, Watson, & Jambor, 1978). It is possible that ethnicity influences the play of boys and girls from the same social class differently. That is, boys and girls may differ in social orientation and in characteristic play type according to their race. The influence of particular

combinations of race and gender (as indicated by a statistical interaction) on social orientation and cognitive play has not been studied.

The confounding of race and social class in most previous comparisons of black and white children and generalizations about black children which are based on lower SES samples, led to the hypothesis that when both groups of children are from the middle social class, black and white children do not differ in people and object orientation nor in the frequency with which they engage in Smilansky's (1968) cognitive play types. Thus, the purpose of this study was to compare black and white preschool children from the middle socioeconomic strata on people and object orientation and on the cognitive play types in which they most frequently engage and to ascertain whether gender or a race x gender interaction influences people and object orientation or the frequency of engagement in the cognitive play types.

Method

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 112 black and white middle SES preschool children. All the children from seven preschool classrooms in two racially integrated private schools serving professional and managerial level families were included. The mean age was 4 years, 11 months, with a standard deviation of 8 months. The sample consisted of 47 boys and 65 girls, 85 black and 27 white children. The schools were selected because they were comparable in teaching philosophy, amount of structure, scheduling, materials, and the amount of free play time scheduled. Preschoolers were studied because they are at the point in their development in which they engage in the three types

of cognitive play (functional, constructive, and dramatic) and because preschool provides periods during which the children can play freely. During these periods play which is not directed by the teacher can be observed.

Procedures

The behaviors of each child were randomly sampled by means of a time-sampling procedure in which 5-second observation periods were followed by 10-second recording periods. Each child was observed during indoor free play for 80 ten-second periods, or a total of 20 minutes. The observations took place over a 3-month period. Social play behaviors observed and recorded were (a) social interaction or noninteraction with peers and (b) occupation or nonoccupation with a task when the subject was not interacting with peers. A social interaction was defined as any social interchange with peers, including eye contact, talking, smiling, gesturing, or touching. Noninteraction was defined as playing alone without any social interchange with peers. If the child was not interacting, the behavior was recorded as either occupied—defined as engagement with some material or task—or as unoccupied—defined as being alone without task engagement or watching others without participating in their activity. At the same time, the child's cognitive play type--functional, constructive, or dramatic—was observed and recorded. Functional play was recorded when the child's activity consisted of simple repetitive movements which lacked purpose, direction, and organization. Constructive play was defined as activity that was purposeful, goal-directed, organized, and creative. Dramatic play was defined as fantasy, make-believe,

or imaginative play. All cognitive play types could occur with or without materials.

To establish reliability for the observation system, four pairs of observers were used. The members of each pair simultaneously, but independently, observed the same subject. Reliability was computed on both the occurrence and the nonoccurrence of each behavior. The formula for computing reliability was the number of agreements divided by the sum of the number of agreements and disagreements. For the occurrence of behaviors, the mean interobserver agreement was .92. For the nonoccurrence of behaviors, the mean interobserver agreement was .95.

Results

For the purpose of examining race and gender differences in social orientation, the children were classified on the basis of their classroom distribution for social interaction and for task engagement when they were alone. First, three types of social interactors were identified—low social interactors, moderate social interactors, and high social interactors. Low social interactors fell in the bottom 20 percent of their class; high social interactors fell in the top 20 percent of their class; and moderate social interactors fell in the middle 60 percent of their class. Then, to discriminate between low interactors who were object oriented and children who were neither object nor people oriented, the low social interactors were further identified as either occupied or unoccupied. The occupied low interactors were one standard deviation below the mean for frequency of unoccupied behavior, and the unoccupied low interactors were one standard

deviation above the mean for frequency of unoccupied behavior.

Children who were moderate or high social interactors were considered to be people oriented. Children who were low interactors but were occupied with objects or tasks were defined as object oriented. Five children identified as unoccupied low interactors were engaged with neither children nor tasks. These children were not included in the analyses, since they were, by definition neither object oriented nor people oriented. The resulting subjects were 20 occupied low interactors (object oriented), 62 moderate interactors (people oriented), and 25 high interactors (people oriented).

A chi-square test was computed in order to determine whether black and white children differed in social orientation. Black and white children were compared on the frequency with which they were categorized as occupied low social interactors, moderate social interactors, and high social interactors. The chi-square test was not significant, indicating that black and white middle SES preschool children did not differ on object orientation or on the two levels of people orientation.

To determine whether boys and girls differed in people orientation and object orientation, a chi-square test was computed. Boys and girls were compared on the frequency with which they were categorized as occupied low social interactors, moderate social interactors, and high social interactors. The overall chi square was significant, (2) = 5.99, $p < .05$. Follow-up chi-square analyses employing partitioning of contingency tables into single degrees of freedom (Kimball, 1954) were performed. The only significant gender difference was between the moderate and high social interactors, with more boys

than girls in the high group. No gender differences occurred between the low and moderate interactors.

Since there were more boys than girls categorized as high social interactors, a chi-square test was computed in order to ascertain whether particular combinations of race and gender influenced people and object orientation. Black and white boys were compared on the frequency with which they were categorized as moderate social interactors and high social interactors. The chi-square test was not significant, indicating that race did not influence the categorization of the boys as high or moderate interactors.

To ascertain whether black and white boys and girls differed in the frequency with which they engaged in the cognitive play types, a 2 (race) x 2 (gender) multivariate analysis of variance was computed. The dependent variables were functional play, constructive play, and dramatic play. Each variable was measured by the frequency with which each child engaged in the particular type of play. The MANOVA yielded no significant race or gender differences and no significant race x gender interaction. This finding indicated that black and white boys and girls did not differ in the frequency of their engagement in the three cognitive play types.

Discussion

Although it has been suggested that, in contrast to white children, black children are people oriented, the results of this study indicated that black children are no different from white children on people and object orientation. The black children in this study were from the middle social strata, whereas the samples in most studies of the people orientation of black

children have been from a lower SES population. These findings underscore the importance of considering the social class of the children when ethnic characteristics are described.

The notion that black children are people oriented would lead to the expectation that they would differ from white children on the frequency with which they engage in Smilanky's (1968) cognitive play types, since the type of play in which children engage has been shown to be influenced by social interaction as well as by developmental level (Pinkett & Quay, 1985). The results of this study indicate that black and white children do not differ on their engagement in functional, constructive, or dramatic play. These results support the findings of Griffing (1980) and McLoyd (1985), who studied only sociodramatic play but found that variables other than race influenced the pretend play behaviors of black children.

Among these middle-SES black and white children gender did not influence any of the variables with the exception that there were more boys than girls in the highly sociable group. However, this gender difference was characteristic of both races.

On both social and cognitive play behaviors no race differences nor gender by race interactions were found. The results of this study substantiate the need for caution in considering that black children are members of a homogeneous ethnic group and that their ethnicity makes them different from other groups of children on social and cognitive characteristics.

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